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AUTHOR Stevenson, Robert L.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Three studies were conducted to test the beliefs that respondents' lack of opinions on public issues offer a realistic explanation for the inconsistencies of opinion measurement and that public opinion researchers may err by forcing respondents to express opinions they really do not hold. The first study, a survey of 612 adults, asked the subjects three questions on current issues of varying psychological distance: whether they had an opinion, what the opinion was, and whether they considered themselves personally involved in the issue. The results indicated that psychological involvement and opinion holding were correlated to a degree not often found in social science research. A second study, in which 78 college students ranked the importance of six current events issues, showed that those subjects who saw themselves as psychologically involved in five of the six issues rated the issues higher or as being more salient than those subjects who did not see themselves as psychologically involved. The third study surveyed 600 voters' reasons for voting for and against the 1980 presidential candidates and showed that people who saw themselves as involved in the election had more information and/or opinions than those who did not see themselves as involved. (RL)

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A Nation of Bystanders: Psychological Involvement and Public Opinion

Robert L. Stevenson
Jane D. Brown
Susan D. Ross

School of Journalism
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill NC 27514

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A Nation of Bystanders:
Psychological Involvement and Public Opinion

One of the curious aspects about public opinion in the United States is that it is so much a part of public life but so little discussed. By this we do not mean the latest shifts of the President's popularity rating or what the electorate would do if an election were held today -- topics which surely get too much attention in both the news media and politics -- but rather a failure to consider seriously what it is that the ubiquitous opinion polls measure and even whether something called "public opinion" exists.

Not that pollsters do not debate their craft, of course. But a comparison of recent work in the field with writings of about a generation ago when public opinion research was emerging as a distinct field reveals some interesting differences.

Much -- perhaps most -- of recent academic critiques of public opinion research has focused on questions of methodology: how to handle "don't know" (Francis and Busch, 1975; Coombs and Coombs, 1976-77), how to distinguish between "don't know" and "no opinion" (Schuman and Presser, 1980; Faulkenberry and Mason, 1978), and, of course, the perennial problems of question wording (Bishop, et al., 1978; Schuman and Presser, 1977) and the relative merits of open- vs. closed-ended questions (Schuman and Presser, 1979). But there is in most of this work an absence of consideration of what opinions are or questioning of the assumption that just about everyone has them.

In contrast, efforts to deal with the theory of public

opinion are more characteristic of some of the early writing in the field. Some of the best work -- by many of the founders of the field -- is usefully collected in the Public Opinion Quarterly reader edited by Carlson (1975). This reader and, of course, the classic and still pertinent work of Tocqueville (1835-49), Bryce (1910) and Lippmann (1922, 1925, 1955) raise questions about the nature of public opinion that too many of us no longer pay much attention to.

In this paper, we propose to renew a question about the nature of public opinion and to present some preliminary research that addresses it. We will argue that some of the methodological concerns may be misplaced because the problems of methodology are less technical difficulties than products of a misunderstanding of the nature of public opinion.

Opinions on Everything?

Most public opinion theorists trace their intellectual heritage through political science or psychology to a European tradition of research based on political ideology from which, it is assumed, springs a Weltanschauung, a world outlook or a consistent, coherent view determined by one's location somewhere on the ideological spectrum. Thus "liberals" are supposed to stand for certain values and are expected to support certain programs or candidates, while "conservatives," seeing the world from a different part of the political spectrum, are expected to emphasize other values and to support other programs and candidates.

In psychology, this intellectual approach has spawned a number of quasi-theories of behavior which can be lumped together under the loose title of theories of cognitive consistency, the reasonable notion that people sort out all of the information they are bombarded with into a set of consistent attitudes and behaviors, a coherent Weltanschauung. Some of the theories are quite clever in predicting how people resolve inconsistencies -- what happens, for instance, when our candidate endorses a policy we oppose or when we are induced to make a statement contrary to our beliefs.

These academic traditions are easily compatible with our view of journalism as the fourth estate, monitoring government and providing an informed and interested public with information it needs to maintain its consistent, coherent view of the world. Political man and woman are able, via the media, to fufill their responsibility to be well informed and to respond inteligently when called upon to express their views at the ballot box or to the pollster's query.

The problem with this view of public opinion, of course, is that it does not work very well when subjected to empirical test. People demonstrate an amazing willingness to express opinions on just about everything -- even the Agricultural Trade Act of 1978 (Schuman and Presser, 1980) -- but at the same time display an appalling ignorance of even rudimentary knowledge of public affairs. And even more puzzling, people walk around with all sorts of incompatible ideas in ignorance of what to the cognitive consistency theorist is a hopeless tangle of

"incorrect" opinions.

CBS and the New York Times, for example, found in October-November, 1979 (CBS News, 1979), that only 38% of the American public knew what countries were involved in the SALT treaty, although this was a substantial increase from a similar poll in January, 1979, when only 23% knew the correct answer. In a national survey commissioned by Public Opinion magazine in 1979 (Moore and Craig, 1979), respondents were asked to classify themselves as liberal, moderate or conservative and were later asked their preference among the three leading Democratic candidates, Carter, Kennedy and Brown. There was practically no difference in candidate preference among people who placed themselves at different points on the political spectrum.

Pollsters often justify these opinions-without-facts as an expression of latent opinions, the opinions people would have, given their hierarchy of values, beliefs and sometimes even subconscious feelings. While they acknowledge that they are in a sense creating opinions, not measuring them, they defend the validity of their findings as an exercise in discovering the subtleties of public feeling that are not revealed in letters to the editor, protest demonstrations or other traditional forms of political expression.

The inconsistency of public opinion is more difficult, although the blame is usually assigned to the media for their failure to report accurately or adequately or, if conspiracy theories are preferred, to an effort by the media and/or government to prevent the development of a true political

consciousness by a tactic of divide and confuse. It must be somebody's fault, it is argued, when the masses -- especially the working class masses -- flock to Nixon over McGovern, rally behind Johnson's war policy or send Ronald Reagan to the White House in a landslide.

Occasionally, there are glimmers that public opinion research is carried out more for the convenience of the researcher than the public. Field (1971), for example, concluded in an AAPOR session that "most surveys are essentially the researcher's game, not the respondent's. Since public opinion researchers pose the issues and phrase the questions, they are defining a map of the world that often makes respondents look stupid." He was, in a sense, rediscovering what Bryce (1910) had noted a half century earlier when he noted that public beliefs:

> [w]hen examined, mostly resolve themselves into two or three prejudices and aversions, two or three prepossessions for a particular leader or party or section of a party, two or three phrases or catchwords suggesting or embodying arguments which the man who repeats them has not analyzed.

Lippmann (1955), too, was suspicious of the competence of public opinion:

> Strategic and diplomatic decisions call for a kind of knowledge -- not to speak of an experience and a seasoned judgment -- which cannot be had by glancing at newspapers, listening to snatches of radio comment, watching politicians perform on television, hearing occasional lectures, and reading a few books. It would not be enough to make a man competent to decide whether to amputate a leg, and it is not enough to qualify him to choose war or peace, to arm or not to

arm, to intervene or to withdraw, to fight on or to negotiate.

We suggest that the lack of opinions on public issues may offer a more realistic explanation for the inconsistencies of opinion measurement noted earlier and that public opinion researchers may err more by forcing respndents to express opinions they really do not hold than by failing to devise appropriate techniques for sorting out latent opinions. If we are wrong, we can correct the error by allowing respondents to demonstrate first that they hold opinions. If current public opinion research practice is wrong, the pollsters can seriously misrepresent the state of public opinion, with serious implications for governments which rely more and more on public consent as expressed through public polls.

A Nation of Bystanders

If one defines "opinions" rigorously as the ability to articulate a course of action to deal with a public issue rather than simply the willingness to select one of several alternatives posed by the pollster, one is amazed at how little opinion there is in the public. At the height of the Vietnam War, Edelstein (1973) posed that question in a survey and found that, even then, most people simply could not articulate preferred courses of action. They did not know what to do about the war; in his terms, they did not have opinions.

However, when presented with alternatives, most people approved of most choices. Escalate? Yes, if necessary. Pull

out? Yes, if that's the only way out. Continue the same policy? Well, anything but that. This may explain why almost any presidential action produces a temporary upsurge in presidential popularity (Mueller, 1973). National surveys at the time showed that a majority of the American people approved of congressional action to end the war and, at the same time, of increased efforts to win it. These are not inconsistent if one sees most of the public as observing the turmoil of the battlefield and the anguish of Washington leadership as outsiders, watching casually and passively and "approving" -- giving assent to -- a relatively wide range of policy alternatives, but not choosing one to the exclusion of others. And in most cases, not knowing very much about any.

The idea that most people see themselves as spectators of, rather than participants in, national and world affairs is developed at length in a recent book, Great American Dreams: a Portrait of the Way We Are (Kaiser and Lowell, 1979). These two reporters went to what must be the Mecca of the great American dream -- Las Vegas -- and simply talked to a lot of people about themselves, their lives and their worlds. Drawing inspiration from one of those huge, gaudy buffets the casinos use to entice gambling patrons, the two concluded that for the vast mass of middle America -- they describe it as the half of America below the richest 5% and above the poorest third or so -- personal lives are a smorgasbord pleasantly full of gadgets, vacations and opportunities. Government and the great issues which surround it simply are not very important:

> Politics as it is now practiced simply fails to reach the great mass of Americans. People cannot get interested. Either they don't want anything from government, or they have no faith in the politicians, or they are convinced that nothing they can do would make any difference. There may be a positive element in this situation. At least many millions of Americans feel competent to run their own lives, take care of their own needs without depending on government. But there may be an equal number who have given up on politicians in despair.

A similar feeling was reported by Richard Reeves (1980) who, after retracing Tocqueville's travels across America in the early phases of the 1980 presidential campaign, asked (as interpreted by a headline writer), "Is democracy dead, or is America just on vacation?" He concluded that "This is not a column about President Carter or Congress or Democrats or Republicans, because almost no one I've talked to in these seven months has mentioned these subjects unless I brought them up."

The lack of traditional civic competence -- interest in public affairs, knowledge of issues and the holding of reasoned and reasonable opinions about them -- could be related to the high level of non-voting as well. There is some support for this in a national survey of voting (and non-voting) carried out after the 1976 presidential election (Hadley, 1978). The survey found that the strongest correlates of voting were a sense of control over one's life and a sense of involvement in public affairs. If people do not vote unless they had some sense of being involved in the election, is it also possible that opinion-holding in the rigorous sense that we have defined it above is contingent on a sense of psychological involvement with

the public issues to which it pertains? More simply, we ask whether people must see themselves as involved with specific public issues before they begin to pay attention to them in the news, learn about them and, finally, develop the kind of coherent sense of what should be done to resolve them that most polls take for granted?

For two years, we have been pursuing this line of questioning in several studies. This paper represents a summary of work to date.

Three Studies of Psychological Involvement

Involvement and opinion holding. The first project was a statewide survey in the fall of 1979 which is carried out each semester as a class project. In this survey, 612 adults were interviewed by telephone; the households were selected by random digit dialing, and respondents were selected within households on the basis of sex quotas.

Three questions were developed around current issues of varying psychological distance -- Carter's handling of the flap over the presence of Soviet combat forces in Cuba, the SALT treaty which was coming into the news, and the performance of local schools. The questions were the usual favor/oppose, approve/disapprove kind but were preceded with the option of not having an opinion: "Do you have an opinion about...? If so, do you approve or disapprove...?" And for each issue, we asked respondents whether they considered themselves "personally involved" in the issue.

Table 1 about here

The level of opinion-holding (Table 1) is probably what one should expect, although it is at variance with common fieldwork procedures which interpret "no opinion" as evidence of interviewer incompetence. The difference between SALT and local schools is also predictable given the importance of events and institutions which are psychologically close to people. The relatively high level of opinion-holding about Cuba seems to be related to the emotion attached to that country and America's stormy relations with it, similar to the highly charged gut response to the seizure of the hostages in Iran (Public Opinion, 1980). What is surprising about the levels of psychological involvement in these issues is not that 70% of North Carolina adults do not see themselves as involved in SALT but that almost half of them do not see themselves as involved in local schools.

In Table 2, we summed the three specific measures to examine the relationship between psychological involvement and opinion-holding at a more general level. The two are correlated to a degree not often found in social science research.

Table 2 about here

Involvement and salience. The second study was a simple panel design in the spring of 1980. In this case, we wanted to see if a sense of psychological involvement in public issues --

particularly the presidential campaign -- at one time led to an increase in the salience of the issue later on. This possibility provides an alternative explanation to the popular agenda-setting hypothesis (Shaw and McCombs, 1977) although media exposure might operate independently of psychological involvement in influencing what people think about.

Students in an introductory anthropology class and two journalism classes at the University of North Carolina were asked in early March to rank the importance of a set of six issues in the news -- the economy, Afghanistan, the Olympic boycott, the presidential campaign, the proposal to reinstate the draft, and Iran. We also asked about media use and repeated the question about "personal involvement" in each of the issues. Panels always present problems of mortality, and although we were able to collect data from well over 100 individuals in both March and in a second round a month later, we were able to verify measurements at both points from only 78 students.

Table 3 about here

In Table 3, we present the results of this analysis. The results are not completely satisfactory, although the small sample size is a factor. In five of the six comparisons, those who saw themselves as psychologically involved in the issues rated them higher or more salient than those who did not see themselves as psychologically involved. In the two where there is virtually no difference between the salience assigned by

involved and non-involved, a ceiling effect may be operating because nearly all of the respondents saw themselves as involved. This is not surprising given the emotional character of the Iran issue noted earlier and the draft question which would have an obvious "involvement" for undergraduates.

In contrast, exposure to mass media did not influence the level of salience. We have not reported the data here in detail, but we can indicate simply that there were no differences in the importance assigned to the six issues on the basis of exposure to various media, including the student paper, the local regional paper, newsmagazines and network television. This lack of evidence of media influence at the individual level has been interpreted as challenging the hypothesis of the agenda-setting influence of the mass media (Stevenson and Ahern, 1979).

Involvement and knowledge. The last study we are reporting was a statewide survey in North Carolina in the fall of 1980, carried out about six weeks before the presidential election.

The survey, conducted like the one reported above, included more than 600 respondents, half of whom, randomly chosen, were asked a series of additional questions about their perceptions of the presidential campaign. The questions were modeled after the technique developed by Edelstein (1973) which provides respondents with a matrix that defines how they are orienting themselves toward an issue but avoids the intrusiveness of the typical battery of public opinion questions.

In this case, we asked people to give us their for reasons

for voting for and against each of the two major candidates. We did not look at the substance of the responses but only the number and complexity. We coded whether the respondents gave us a response to each of the four items and whether the responses were simple, vague statements or contained some degree of detailed information. The coding was done by a committee which worked out operational definitions of the complexity scale as it proceeded. In most cases, the distinction was easier to make than to describe: statements like "He's a good man" or "I like him" were categorized as vague while all references to specific policies or personal qualifications were coded as specific. A composite index of information complexity was created by summing across the four responses.

Table 4 about here

Table 4 shows this scale of information complexity by psychological involvement. It is surprising -- and may be a reflection of the state of public concern for public affairs -- that only one-third of the respondents considered themselves as personally involved in the presidential election well into the campaign. We suspect that this reflects the kind of gulf between of public and politics that Kaiser and Lowell and Reeves wrote about.

As we expected, people who saw themselves as involved in the election had more information than those who did not.

So far, we have not looked at the linkages between

psychological involvement and mass media use -- surely one of the major elements of this analysis -- or considered the possibility of the influence of a third variable. Table 4 also includes data pertinent to these considerations.

Education, of course, is very much linked to personal involvement as is use of three major mass media. Sorting out these relationships is one of the projects we intend to pursue.

An important element of this task is to specify more precisely the kind of use people make of mass media: does use differ, in kind and degree, when one is maintaining passive surveillance without trying to resolve the issue from that when one trying to form an opinion from that when one is trying to maintain an opinion? We would expect very different patterns of mass media use when people are "keeping up with the news" in Poland or El Salvador (and maybe Washington and the state capital as well) over which they have no control and no responsibility to form opinions from, for example, political campaigns when they have to choose.

And we might also expect differences between situations where the choices are presented to individuals -- as in elections -- and those where people have the opportunity to invent their own solutions to public problems. We would also expect changes in media use to follow people's changes in orientation toward public issues. For example, as new issues or problems are brought to public attention by the media -- the agenda-setting effect -- people might typically see themselves as uninvolved in them and maintain the passive surveillance --

"keeping up with the news" -- that several of the commentators have described. Then, as individuals see some link between themselves and the issues, their orientation changes toward active efforts to bring the issues into some focus, to decide what to do about them. At this point, we would expect active but indiscriminate information-seeking. Finally, once the decision is made, once the opinion is formed, we could anticipate a shift toward selective exposure, the kind of field verification of the cognitive consistency theories that is not often demonstrated.

Discussion

What we have presented here is the outline of a different approach to the study of public opinion. It is one that provides, we believe, an explanation for the lack of consistency found in most field studies of public opinion and the failure to replicate laboratory studies of cognitive consistency in "real world" settings. We believe that the problem is less a difficulty of methodology than a failure of theory, a failure to understand that the maintainance of a coherent view of the world, prescribed by both the civics textbooks and our theories of human behavior, is unrealistic and unnecessary.

We suspect, from both earlier discussions of the nature of public opinion and current journalistic observations that a sense of personal psychological involvement with public issues -- some linkage between the individual and the remote and often overwhelming set of public problems -- becomes a kind of trigger

that sets off the chain of behavior most of our theories predict. By failing to distinguish different kinds of public issues -- those where people have no practical possibility to influence the issues (and hence no reason to form an opinion) from those where the choices (none of all of which may be acceptable) are determigination and skill of invention -- we suspect that public opinion researchers have added to the confusion over the nature of public opinion.

We have presented evidence which we believe supports this view of public opinion. The degree of self-assessed personal involvement ranges widely and not always in predictable ways: many Americans apparently saw themselves personally involved with the seizure of their countrymen and women in Iran but a surprising number did not perceive personal involvement with the presidential campaign; slightly more than half of the adults in North Carolina felt involved with local school, but almost as many did not.

We have shown that involvement is linked to the holding of opinions, to the level of importance assigned to the issue and to the amount of information known about the issue. Education and mass media use have been shown to be correlated with all of these factors, and we need to do more work to sort out these influences.

What may emerge is a revival of the distinction between "elite" opinions and "mass" opinions, although we would argue that the difference is more than one of level of information or coherence. It is more a question of difference between public

opinions and pseudo-opinions. The latter are an artifact of research methodologies which insist on opinions from everyone but which also fail to recognize the psychological value of passive surveillance of the social and political environment for which non-partisan, information-oriented news media are functional; the former are more important than we have assumed because they are rarer and certainly more important to the creation and maintenance of sound public policy.

In a world where public opinion is an increasingly powerful component of public policy, public opinion is too important to be left to the pollsters.

Table 1: Opinion-holding and psychological involvement in public affairs.

"Do you have an opinion about the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty or SALT treaty now before the Senate? ...Carter's handling of the issue of the Soviet troops in Cuba? ...how your local schools are doing?" "Do you see yourself as personally involved in this issue or not?"

	Opinion	No Opinion	Involved	Not Involved
SALT n=612	33%	67	29%	71
Cuba n=612	57%	43	36%	64
Schools n=612	70%	30	53%	47

Table 2: Opinion-holding by psychological involvement in public affairs.

	Involvement:		
	Low n=196	Medium n=199	High n=217
Opinion-holding:			
High	25%	43%	52%
Medium	19	27	29
Low	56	30	19

p=.00 (chi square)

Table 3: Mean ranks of six issues by personal involvement.

	Not involved	Involved	p (t-test)
Economy	2.23	1.65	.08
Afghanistan	4.20	3.44	.00
Olympic boycott	5.29	4.80	.07
Presidential campaign	3.83	2.10	.00
Draft registration	4.40	4.43	.87
Iran	2.71	2.71	.91

Table 4: Political knowledge by personal involvement.

	Not involved n=204	Involved n=96	p (t-test)
Political knowledge	3.26	4.27	.00
Years education	11.88	13.31	.00
Age	41.88	42.18	.89
Newspaper use (0-7)	4.28	5.19	.01
TV news (0-7)	4.04	4.95	.01
Magazines read	.04	.10	.04

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